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ABSTRACT

Seventeen adolescents from four rural high schools in upstate New York were interviewed while in the 12th grade and again a year later. Interviews focused on student perceptions of their community, school, and social life; values; and future plans. All participants graduated from high school, and most went on to college or moved to another community. In most cases, student perceptions changed after exposure to college or a larger community. After leaving their rural communities, participants generally reported a lack of social skills necessary to cope with larger institutions and large numbers of people in more urban settings. They felt the greatest change in perception occurred when they were exposed to a multicultural population and were forced to face the prejudice inherent in their monocultural rural communities and in themselves. However, exposure to the outside world also brought an appreciation for the advantages of growing up in a rural community and strengthened fundamental personal values. These "country values," a term used by many subjects, included importance of family, friends, and community safety and warmth, and a fundamental identification with nature and need for the personal renewal that comes from contact with the outdoors. Students were generally positive about their academic preparation for college, but felt that their high schools had not given them the social skills needed in a more urban environment. Women were more likely to plan on leaving their rural community, both before and after graduation. (SV)

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Change in the Perceptions of Rural Adolescents After Exposure to the Outside World

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Abstract

This is an interpretive study of responses of 17 adolescents from 4 rural high schools who were interviewed while in the 12th grade and again a year later. The interviews focused on student perceptions of their community, school, social life, values and future plans. All of these participants graduated from high school and most went on to college or moved into a new community in the second year of the study. Previous research indicates that this post-graduate exposure to new living conditions affects adolescents' cognitions, values, and life plans. We found that in most cases perceptions did change after the adolescents had been exposed to either college or a bigger community. Their plans and aspirations seemed to stay fairly constant, and their basic values seemed to be strengthened. After leaving their rural communities, participants generally reported a deficiency in social skills necessary to cope with larger institutions and large numbers of people in more urban settings. They felt the greatest change occurred when exposed to a multicultural population and they had to face the prejudice inherent in their unicultural rural communities and in themselves. This same exposure to the outside world seemed to strengthen their fundamental personal values. We call these "country values" since many participants used that term: the importance of family, of friends, of community safety and personal warmth, and a fundamental identification with nature and need for the personal renewal that comes from contact with the outdoors.

Change in the Perceptions of Rural Adolescents

After Exposure to the Outside World.

> In different environments, you react differently. I think people should switch environments. When you change environments you see different things about people. I always wondered how I would get along with more people, wondered what would happen [in college], because it was so much bigger.

This quote demonstrates a concern frequently expressed by rural high school graduates who have gone to college or moved to another community after graduation. Due to this exposure to the "outside world" (Fitchen, 1981) they seem to gain a new perspective on their community, their peers, their family, and their school. Some even acknowledge a new perception of themselves. Fitchen defines the outside world as the way the members of rural communities perceive the closest urban community and its people. "It is both a statement about the larger community and a statement about [their own] identity" (p. 169).

The young adult whose words we quoted has been a member of the same urban-rural (Eberts, 1984) community in upstate New York all his life. He explains how the exposure to the outside world, in his case college, has allowed him to look at people and at places differently. He describes his lack of knowledge about what to expect from and how to deal with a bigger community.

This study is an interpretation of the responses of 12 female and 5 male rural high school students, interviewed both during their senior year and again a year after graduation. We examine how their perceptions change from before graduation to after a year of exposure to the outside world. We are particularly

interested in the impact of exposure on the self definition of rural youth and their subsequent aspirations and life plans.

Background

Haller and Virkler (1993) found exposure as one of the main components determining aspirations of rural young adults. "We aspire to what we know or can imagine" (p. 3). Aspirations in this context means plans and dreams for the future in terms of education, occupation and family. It is not likely, for example, that a young adult who has been raised only in a rural area will aspire a high position in corporate America. These adolescents have been exposed to their local, often agricultural, economy and the occupations that relate to that economy are the ones they are likely to choose.

Rural adolescents' choices are often constrained by the local social and economic structure of their communities, which limit both cultural exposure and job opportunities for young adults (Elliott, Schonert, & Bills, 1988). As a result, youths with higher aspirations tend to migrate to more urban settings (Murray, Keller, McMorran & Edwards, 1983). Should rural high schools be preparing their students to enter the local economy and strengthen rural communities, or to compete in an urban economy and leave the rural community? This is an unresolved issue noted by Haller & Virkler (1993) and Hedlund (1992). We are only concerned with understanding exposure as a main component of personal definition in this study.

O'Neill (1993) found that when comparing themselves to their urban counterparts in terms of exposure to social issues like violence, drugs, and crime, most rural young adults feel they are better off in their rural communities. Yet, "some [rural] students felt that their peers in the cities were stronger emotionally and could handle adverse conditions easier because of this exposure" (p. 28).

Rural educators are aware of the effects of geographical isolation on students, and various attempts have been made to supplement the educational experience. For example, Breen (1989) proposed a program in which school counselors coordinate school staff, administrators, parents, and community members work in a joint effort to provide a positive learning climate, recognizing rapid changes in technology, problem solving skills and career decision making. The goal was to create awareness of the world of work by providing role models to the students who are interested in specific occupations. A variety of adults should be involved in providing supportive environments in which the students can develop positive self-esteem, take risks and explore various lifestyle and career options.

However, the isolation and lack of exposure of rural people is more than a matter of geographical distance: it is a structural, social, and psychological separation (Fitchen, 1981). Fitchen conceptualizes the term "outside world" as a statement about the rural community member's own identity.

Rural adolescents leaving high school are experiencing a developmental and cognitive shift away from egocentrism (Elkind, 1988). The exposure to a more urban society during this transition compounds the cognitive change by providing a whole new perspective both on their own lives and on the complex separation of rural areas that Fitchen (1981) describes.

Erikson (1950) explains the development of self identity, the primary developmental task leading to adulthood, as an integration of family roots and self, and a connectedness between past, present, and future. We explore the effects of a one year exposure to the outside world on this process through the perceptions of a group of 17 rural adolescents in this study.

Methods

This study is framed within the Program in Rural Youth Development (PRYDe), a four year longitudinal interpretive study which attempts to better understand rural youth. The data were gathered between 1989-1993 by interviewing ninth to twelfth graders for four consecutive years. Contact with those who graduated was attempted every year. The participants (N=87) represent adolescents from four rural high schools in upstate New York who were volunteers with parental permission required. The group tends to include students with higher socio-economic status and higher academic achievement than is representative of the total student population in each school. Generalizations taken from this study should take into account its non-representativeness (See Hedlund, 1993, for a more complete description of the project).

Participants. The 17 participants in this study were all of the seniors during the first year of PRYDe interviews (1989/90) that were also interviewed the year following graduation. The female/male ratio (12/5) in our sample is representative of the gender ratio in the larger project. These students attended four different rural high schools, each representing a category in Eberts (1984) classification: urban suburban, urban rural, rural suburban and rural rural, related to the size of the largest town and the distance to a metropolitan center.

Coding. Interviews were conducted by trained undergraduate and graduate students. For the first two years they followed a semi-structured protocol, which inquired about community, family, school, self and social life. The interviews were then transcribed and coded according to these major themes. Three raters developed second and third level codes by reading interviews and agreeing upon recurrent subthemes. These lower level codes were defined in a way that they could be combined with any of the first level codes. @CMY--first

level, %DSC--second level, %ISN--third level, is a description of the community that implies isolation--"I have no neighbors." But if the student is explaining that she does not "hang out" with her peers because they live far away, then the code will be @SOCL%PRR%ISN. Codes were inserted in transcripts and summaries of various codes were collected using macros in WordPerfect on a Macintosh computer to facilitate the manipulation of data for analysis (Hedlund, 1993).

Analysis. We first prepared and read summary documents of interview sections relating to Community Description, School Description, Self Values, Self Plans and Self Dreams. The summary documents were very informative, but did not offer enough context to understand and interpret what the adolescents were sharing. We then proceeded to read each of the thirty four interviews corresponding to both years, one student at a time, in order to understand the development of individual perceptions from one year to the next.

Findings

We will first summarize the participants' general views on their community and their high school as well as their values and plans during their senior year and then contrast that with their views in the year following graduation. Finally, we will discuss how opinions toward peers differ between those who left the community and those who stayed. The interviews were similarly structured for both years, therefore the topics they address are the same. In the quotes from interviews that follow, "I:" is the interviewer and "P:" is the participant.

Senior year

Fifteen of the 17 students in this sample were certain they wanted to attend college following high school graduation. Some had already been

accepted. One of the interviewees said that college was a possibility, but that her real goal at this time was to get a job that allowed her to support herself. The remaining participant planned to enter the Army.

Community: shelter and prejudice. All of the students in this study felt that their communities were small, isolated, and that there was nothing to do. Yet, most mentioned that as a result of the size, people were friendly and helpful, like a big family. They valued how safe the community was. The perception that the community was close-knit meant that it was a supportive environment. However, for three out of every four participants it also meant they experienced a lack of privacy. The vast majority of the participants commented on the negative impact of gossip in their communities.

A female 12th grader sums up what seems to be a general perception among her peers:

> I: What's it like to live in [town]?
> P: Oh, it has its advantages and its disadvantages, most of all because it's boring, there's not much to do around here. The thing of it is when you're 16, you know, automatically most people want to get their license because its like a ticket out of here because there's nothing to do. There's nothing within walking distance, you know, most of it is like 20 minutes, even a half hour away.
> I: Um-hmm, by car.
> P: Yeah, well, by car. But it's all right, and as far as, community wise it's nice because everyone knows each other. But, you know, once in a while I wish I would get out of here. On the other hand I like the community. There's a lot of disadvantages but I look at it as more advantages. One big disadvantage I think is that it's so small that when something happens everyone knows about it. Talk, you know, the community gossip, it gets around in no time. Everyone knows about everything within a day probably.
> I: So you wish you had privacy.
> P: Yeah kinda. I wish, you know, that everyone wasn't so close together.

With reference to the positive aspects of the community, this same student continued:

> P: I like the security of living in the country. It's almost like you're afraid to leave the community. But, you know, you always want to get out because you want to explore-- there's so much more out there. But, then again, I think that I may be afraid later on, you know. Like, I haven't gone to college yet obviously.
> I: Um-hmm.
> P: And I think it certainly, I can't wait, I'm excited about it. But, then again, I'm afraid to leave the town you know.

More than a third of the seniors agreed with this student that they were experiencing both desire and fear about their plans to go to college and leave their community. They explain that rural settings shelter people from the social complexity of the rest of the world. A female student shared her fears of going away from her community:

> I feel so closed from what society is really like-- on the one hand I want to get in touch with the real world, but on the other I feel I'm not prepared to deal with it. It's scary thinking about leaving.

This shelteredness probably magnifies the typical vocational confusion and the loss of egocentrism experienced by high school seniors contemplating entrance into the adult world. A female tells of her fears of failure, of facing independence from her family, and of coping in a world with which she is not familiar:

> The hardest choice is just to decide what you're going to do after high school. It's just so hard to figure out what you should do, 'cause you have to do it the rest of your life. When you're in high school it doesn't really matter what you do. I mean you'll always have another, it seems like you always have another year and you'll just be here forever. In this little world you don't have to make money or worry about your security because your parents support you and you have a place to live. But, after, it's really scary, I mean it's really scary thinking about leaving. You don't know what you're going to do or where you're going to be. What if you pick the wrong decision...? I really wish I knew more about the world,

you know, things that would make it easier for me to make the transition.

Three female students, all from the second most rural school seem to be the exception. They saw college as an opportunity to be themselves, and anticipated leaving the community. They claimed that rural societies label people, since everybody has known everybody else forever. They felt they would not be able to overcome that social constraint if they stayed in the community. One of these students put it this way:

P: [Town] is such a small community-- everybody has known you for all your life. At least I've lived here for all my life. And, um, so they expect you to be a certain way. And its real hard to take.
I: Um-hmm. You would like to change?
P: Um, yes, uh-huh.
I: What do you mean, how you feel?
P: They, they just think of me as real quiet and not outgoing. They think I'm always studying in school, but I'm not. Everybody thinks I am, cause I guess that's the image I present.
I: Uh-huh.
P: And when I go away to college I can change my image. I'm really excited about it. Nobody will know me, that's very different. You can be whoever you are now rather than who you were ten years ago.
I: Uh-huh.
P: You don't have a past, you're just a new person.

She mentions two main topics in this part of the interview: shelter as a factor that transforms into social control in rural communities and a search for identity outside of the community. The identity issue, lack of appropriate role models with whom to identify within the community, was mentioned by four of the students, all females. For example:

I'm trying to think of someone that does anything interesting, or, umm, challenging in this community, and, you know, and besides a few teachers, maybe two teachers in the whole high school, and my Dad, I can't think of nobody else. Some of my friends' role models are, I don't know, school teachers maybe. A lot of them want to be teachers or nurses because their moms are nurses. Me not. When

> you do art as I do, I paint, it's hard. I really dream of establishing myself in the city, making a living out of my art.

All of the participants had something to say about the effects of living in such a sheltered community. Roughly a third were afraid of leaving since they felt they were not familiar with the outside world. The rest saw college as an opportunity to escape their overprotective environments. One male student explained his need to know what he was sheltered from:

> Rural people are naive to the world. There are things that happen out there that I haven't experienced yet because I live here. Things happen and we are the ones to learn last, and that's one of the reasons I have to go to college--I just want to know what I've been missing.

Over half of the participants understood shelteredness as a positive quality of their community. They felt they were not being deprived, but rather protected from the vices of the big cities. They valued the security that their society provided them with while growing up. A male offered his opinion:

> Here we are not as exposed to crime and murders as in the city, you know. There are drugs all right, but it's not a main issue. My brother who's in college says that there's dope all over the place. I've been there visiting, and it's nothing like here. Here it's pretty boring, but safe.

Isolation and shelteredness affect social behavior, and, as five students agree, rural adolescents turn to alcohol as a consequence of nothing better to do. At least two thirds of the participants mention alcohol as a main problem in their peer group. One female identified alcohol abuse as a reason for lower aspirations for some students:

> At one end of the continuum are those who start drinking at age 12 and will just never get out of [town]--never. They just don't give themselves a chance to experience the world. They don't know the difference between a career and a job. All they wanna be is, I don't

know, work at the cash register at [the grocery store] or the drugstore. Those are summer jobs not careers.

The next topic that emerges from the discussion of isolation in rural communities is prejudice. Just a few students, the ones who seem to have had the most exposure (either lived in other places or traveled outside the community), recognized the prevalence of prejudice while they were still in high school. A male student who used to attend a bigger high school provided a thoughtful analysis:

P: We don't have any Black people in school. None of the minorities, not Hispanics or anything like that. I just feel so closed off from what society's really like.
I: Uh-huh. What do you think society's really like that's different?
P: I don't know, I think people are more tolerant. Everybody here, almost everybody here is um, I think either Catholic or Protestant, fairly religious. There's very few Jewish people and I just think that society's more receptive to, uh, different cultures and ideas than we are here.
I: Umhmm.
P: And I don't think, I mean, the school doesn't help that much either. We don't have any classes, like, teaching us about different religions, different cultures. There's social studies, but that doesn't teach much about cultures. I would like to get a different perspective on all that.
I: So people in this community aren't very tolerant?
P: I don't think they're as tolerant. I mean, maybe they haven't been exposed to as much. So they don't realize how many different types of people there are. I think there's a real large fear of gay people, homosexuals. They don't see it and they, um, they don't know what to expect and they're afraid of them.

A female from the least rural high school supports the same viewpoint with an example:

P: Here you don't get to mix at all with other cultures
I: What do you mean by mixing with other cultures.
P: Like I guess its mostly like you don't know, like, people from different countries or the blacks or people that are really different from you. This town is pretty... redneck, kinda?
I: Um-hmm.

> P: There's this one kid in our class that nobody likes 'cause he hates anybody that's different from him. Anybody that's from a different country he just doesn't like. I think that the problem is he's not going to get along in the big city. Because if you get out there and you get a lot of people, you get different cultures and you get different people, different ideas and different customs and you get to learn. I think you learn more.

A student who had lived in the community all her life, but moved to a bigger community for two years, complained that prejudice was so strong that her classmates even looked at her as a stranger when she returned for her senior year.

School. For the most part, the participants were more aware of differences among social classes in the school, cliques, than of the community's prejudice against other cultures or the outside world. Although they mentioned that people in school were pretty much the same, they identified categories such as farmers, jocks, metal heads and a number of in-betweens. Some were looked upon with a lot more prestige than others, and farmers seemed to occupy the bottom categories. Different opinions arose when discussing what kind of education was appropriate for the students in the different cliques.

Some adolescents explained that the social structure of the school reflected the goals and abilities of the students. There were those who felt high school was aimed at preparing them only for college. A female participant from the most rural community expressed that high school education should be suited to where it operates, and for whom it wants to educate. She mentioned that it should be more realistic than trying to prepare everyone for college, since "just a few get a college education":

> I would like to see more common sense classes. Like, you have algebra, math. And some of these kids just aren't going to be algebra-math students. They need to know how to balance a checkbook. The need to learn how to get along in the community,

> be able to budget themselves. Some of them obviously aren't going to go to college, but they should be able to leave the school with enough knowledge to live the right way.

On the other hand, three females from different high schools complain that their schools did not prepare them academically for college:

> There are not a lot of college preparatory classes. I can't even begin to imagine what college is going to be like. I mean, for thirteen years, I have come in with the same schedule every year. And now I am going to go off to college and it is going to be totally different. And, I think if we had a class or something, that helped us prepare for that, then it wouldn't be such a drastic change. Um, I think that we also should have an SAT preparatory class. Because I went, and I really did terrible on this. So, I think if there is a class or something and you can take an exam or something like that and get them ready for it, you know, then, you would do better. I really bombed on that. I think that would have helped me and most of my friends who want to go to college.

Almost half of the participants, though, thought that in spite of the budget cuts that imply cuts in school activities and classes offered, their high school was preparing them adequately for college. As a male put it, "it is easier to get a good education in a small town like this than in the city, 'cause here there are less things happening that may distract you."

Plans and aspirations. One student out of the seventeen planned to stay in the community, and applied only to the closest community college as a result of her attachment to the community. The other sixteen planned to move, at least during their college years. Eleven students expressed that they wanted to establish themselves and their future families in less rural communities, like the suburbs of a bigger town. Only two, both female, wanted to leave their rural community for the city. Four students planned to return to their community. Coincidentally, all four of these aspired a two-year college degree.

On a more personal level, almost all the participants dreamed of a rather simplistic yet down to earth future. They want to have a good job, one that will allow them to live comfortably and to use their college education, and they also want to have a nice family. About half mentioned that for them it was important to have a solid relationship with their spouses since they were very aware of the negative consequences of divorce. In the words of a female:

> I'd love to have the perfect family. People say that we were the perfect family before my parents got divorced. I would really like to make sure that when I get married my kids have everything I didn't have, a family unit, stability, support from both your parents. I know what divorce did to my sisters and me and I know I don't want that for my kids.

A general theme that surfaced in nearly every interview was the participants' aspiration to have a comfortable rather than an affluent future. Roughly a third mentioned specifically that they did not dream of being rich, but of having enough money to get by. They seem to agree with a female that expressed:

> I don't want to be rich, you know, I don't want to have it all. I just need something to look forward to. It has to be really boring not to.

Once again comfort, not excesses, was the dream of a female from the most rural school:

> I would like a nice house, you know. I've lived in a trailer most of my life, and I know that having my own house will give me and my kids, if I have them, more stability and, umm, security while growing up.

<u>First year postgraduate</u>

Sixteen students attended college following high school graduation, of which one female dropped out during the first semester. Only one participant did not attend college at all, but she did move out of her

community to find a job. The male who planned on joining the Army finally attended a two year program in a community college. Of the 9 (6 females and 3 males) who aspired to attend a four year college program, 5 (4 females and 1 male) really did; and while 6 students planned to attend two year programs, 9 finally did.

Of the four participants that did not enroll in four year programs although that was their plan when they were interviewed a year earlier, three gave the same reasons for the change. They explained that they had decided to move to smaller colleges where they were more comfortable with its size. They thought they would not get used to huge classes, so they settled for two year programs in this small colleges. The fourth participant could not afford to move out of her home, so she was forced to change her plans and go to the college closest to town.

School & College. About two thirds of the students agreed that high school prepared them academically for college. It is important to notice that four students appreciated their academic preparation more once in college than they did in high school. All of the participants attending four-year programs but one, had a higher regard for their academic background than those who were pursuing two year college degrees. The one college dropout had the harshest words for her high school:

> In [town] we only had one AP class and you know, the rest of the classes were, you know, pretty basic. There were no choices, actually, for the ones who were going to college. So I think I was deprived of that opportunity, you know, because when I came here I was sort of behind on credits. Some of the other people in my freshman class who came from bigger high schools had a lot of AP courses. They were able to get ahead, whereas I was just starting. And I think that was one, you know, weak point that [high school] had, at least the school district, is that they don't offer as many courses as they would in a larger community. Then you have to

> compete with all these people that have taken courses in stuff I've never seen before. It's like starting off with a handicap.

A female, on the other hand, explained how going away to college has made her value her high school experience:

> I think going away to a bigger school helped me grow more, but it also made me realize how lucky I was to go to a smaller school. A lot of people come and I tell them there were only 33 students in my graduating class, and they think I'm lying. They just can't comprehend 33 people graduating. But yet, if you ask, they'll tell you stories about three or four friends. But that's all that they can tell you about. You know, I could tell them stories about every person in my class.

Some of the participants complained in high school that it was boring to belong their limited peer group. Many of them, though, share with this young woman that, after experiencing the huge and impersonal college classes, their small high school class seemed like a privilege.

When referring to the disadvantages of going to school in a rural community, one male explained that he had found a lot of differences between himself and the college students who came from bigger communities, though not necessarily academic:

> Students from bigger high schools knew a lot of things I had no idea about. They just, it's not that they were smarter, necessarily, because their grades suck at college. They just knew a lot of things that I have never been exposed to, you know, like streetwise and stuff that happens out there in the city.

Community: shelter and prejudice. Most students agree that they felt confident academically when they started college, but all of the 16 participants that attended college commented that the community had not done a good job providing them with the appropriate social skills to cope with college. In the words of a female:

> I: Do you think living and growing up in [town] didn't really prepare you for that aspect?

P: Oh, not at all, because there's no one ever around and colored people are, you know, something you can't believe. You come up here and it's like, there's hundreds of people and most of them are Black and I wasn't prepared to deal with it. I didn't know anybody from the city either and such.
I: How did it go?
P: I was astounded. It took me quite a while to get adjusted.

A female boldly explained that "neither high school or the community prepare people to be tolerant or respectful to the minorities. They just don't teach you to be socially aware. You aren't ready to go out into the world."

The theme of not finding it easy to adjust socially to college as a consequence of having been brought up in a closed rural community is illustrated by this male:

In this town everybody has known everybody else forever. Everyone looks the same, goes to the same churches and people study with the same 35 people from kindergarten. Then you go to college and you have to learn to cope with all those differences at once by yourself.

At least a third of the young people explain that they were awed at how much freedom it meant for them not to be subject to the shelter of their community members. A female, who moved to a college in a much larger community, explained how much she valued her newly found privacy and anonymity:

P: I don't know why I like [college town] so much. It looks like a nice town and it's different from [town], and nobody knows me. It's nice to be anonymous sometimes.
I: Uh-huh. What is nice about being anonymous?
P: You can do whatever you want without anyone asking you what you're doing and why you're doing it and if you're not talking they aren't going to ask you if you're depressed, or what's wrong. Sometimes you just don't want to be with people and here you're always with people and they're always talking t you and seeing you, coming over. In [college town] you can just wander around, be

> by yourself, do what you want and people don't really notice you. They see you and they're not mean to you but you're not part of their life. They see their lives from a totally different perspective. It's like watching TV or something, you can look at these people and see what they do but you don't know what they're thinking. And here [home town] it's not the same because you know the people and you already have opinions formed of them.
> I: Uh-huh.
> P: You can't help stop having opinions of them because you've known them too long.

Another constant theme in the interviews is participants' complaining about the lack of exposure to minorities that their community has to offer. A few of the young adults sensed this issue since high school, but for most it took college to make them realize their isolation. A female in her second semester in college explained that she perceived prejudice in rural communities as a matter of ignorance:

> In rural towns you don't experience multiculturalism and therefore you are not prepared for it when you get to college. You don't learn about other cultures in high school. You don't have the tools to face these problems because you don't have them, but still you'll need those tools in college.

Another female explained that prejudice is not just a consequence of isolation, but that racism is a real strain in rural communities:

> In the whole school there was just one Black girl who was in my class. I now understand that she must have lived a nightmare here. She had a really hard time here. Her family was run out of town in the 7th grade. Their house was stoned because the older generation did not like them living in town, cause it was an eyesore. High school students aren't very tolerant, because their parents and their grandparents aren't tolerant at all. At that time it was all a big joke, but I now understand the damage we all caused.

A male student described that he could only see the whole picture once he saw it from a distance. He had to move several hundred miles away from his community to look at people with a broadened perspective,

because at home he was not able to encounter social differences:

> In different environments you react differently. People should switch environments to learn and appreciate differences in people and learn to cope with them and respect them.

Values and development. More than half of the participants explained that they started to appreciate their "country values" once they were away from their communities. They mentioned that they started to value things they took for granted in their communities, like politeness and how closely supportive people were. One female realized that in college "sometimes my morals get in the way of having fun. I'd rather not have fun-- I guess that's my country bias."

Another woman explained that college had made her change the way she saw things back home, that her perceptions seemed to be shifting. What was once boring or alienating now seemed warm and peaceful.

> I: How has your perception of your community changed since you've come to college or has it?
> P: Oh, I used to think it was boring and I came to college and there's so much going on, party till you puke kind of idea and everything like that. College is fast. I don't know if it's because I'm from the country, but college is fast. I actually love going home on weekends, I go home every weekend just because I'm not the party till you puke type. I puke much too soon. (Laughs) I tried it, didn't like it. I was, honest, it wasn't fun. Coming home for me, it's just sort of like a peaceful place to go. It's kind of nice to be alone, no one knocks on your door.
> I: So do you appreciate it a little bit more since you went away?
> P: Oh, yeah. I appreciate it a lot.

After a year out of high school, the perceptions of the participants seem to have polarized to either identifying themselves more with their rural community, or feeling that there is nothing for them in rural America anymore. There were only two who said that things had not changed

much, both male. One female expressed:

> P: I went back to my old high school, and I felt very uncomfortable. Um, I don't know, it's probably the same place. Maybe I've changed, you know, just because I'm not there anymore.
> I: You've been exposed to a lot more.
> P: Yeah, I've been exposed to a lot more. Different cultures and people and stuff.

A female, who said in the first interview that she was certain she would establish herself in a rural community, expressed after a year in college:

> P: Now I know this is a town that I wouldn't want to live in for the rest of my life. It's very, very close-minded. I mean, once you go away to college you see the life that everybody else lives, you know, like in bigger places.
> I: Right.
> P: And I've noticed that everything was so closed and wasn't really ready for a change or anything.

Another female said that the main effect living in a rural community had on her was that she knew for sure that she wanted to leave it.

> P: Living in [college town] made me realize that I didn't want to stay in [home town] forever.
> I: What are some of the things that you disliked about going to [home town]?
> P: Like I said before, there were a lot of people that are very gossipy and a lot of them, they really don't know what it's like to go anyplace else. I have a lot of friends that didn't go to college and they really didn't get out of [town]. I mean, even if they moved to another town after they graduated from high school, they didn't really leave. I mean they were only a half hour away or so. You know, they really didn't get out of the routine of what they were doing. They were just doing the same old, same old, and that's pretty much what [home town] is all about. I mean you have the same stuff day after day. You don't ever get out of it, and that's not what I want for myself.
> I: So it really takes going away to school to get out of it.
> P: Yeah.

Generally, our graduates felt that a year of college in a more urban setting had affected their attitudes and way of thinking in a significant way.

Most described themselves as more liberal and tolerant. This was often contrasted to friends back home. All but two of the participants mentioned that their peers who stayed in the community had not changed at all. One of them, a female, gave a typical response:

> I think that they have been taught a certain way by their parents and they haven't experienced enough to have good, open views about issues like prejudice and acceptance of minorities. They just follow the views of their parents, so, no, they haven't changed too much.

A male participant thought his peers were pretty much the same as when he had left them the previous year. He contrasted that perception of his peers with his own development:

> P: My friends sound like they are about the same. I think I'm the one who has grown a little, you know, a little since I left [town] just because there is so much more out here offered to me. Um, just because no matter where you go in college or whatever, there's lots of things offered and I think I've grown to that. I don't know if my friends have really participated in anything or any... I guess they seem about the same.
> I: How would your friends say that you've changed since the past year?
> P: I think they'd say I was a more open minded person about things and um, I don't know, they might say that I'm also maybe liberal too. I'm a liberal person about most things, too. Because I've been introduced to so many different things that it has just made me more open about everything I think.

For the most part, the interviewees perceived they had become more tolerant and respectful towards other cultures as a result of having been exposed to them. A male explains that he sees things different now that he is living away, and he referred to what he thinks should be changed in order to make his a better community:

> I: If you could change one thing now going back, what would you change about the town?
> P: I'd probably change, you know, try to change the ideas of the adults in a way. Because a lot of the kids, they just don't know really what's out there. A lot of them are staying in [town] because

their grandparents were there and so on and so forth. They're not really, a lot of them don't go to college. They are not motivated because they know nothing about what's outside.
I: Uh-huh. So you would kind of like open people's minds, like expose them to more things...
P: Yeah, you know, find a way to make them see that there's a whole different world filled with other cultures and other people.

Plans and aspirations. When asked about their future plans a year after graduation, the participants gave a variety of answers. There were those who wanted to never again set foot in their rural communities (about one fourth). Others claimed that, although they liked their newly acquired bigger communities, they would rather raise their families in a place just a bit bigger than home (about half). And finally, the remainder returned home whenever possible during their first year in college and definitely would like to go back to settle themselves in their own or similar rural communities. A realistic participant from the latter group expressed that her worst fear was that she might not get a job in her community where she could use her college education, and therefore she might be forced to leave.

On a more personal level, most participants hoped to get married and have a family in the future. Males were usually more specific in their career goals than females. The general feeling among males was that they wanted college years to go by fast so they could concentrate on getting a job that will allow them to live a comfortable life thereafter. Females, on the other hand, were more ambiguous in describing their career plans. They usually aimed to occupations related to the human services. Actually, four wanted to be teachers and two nurses.

Typically, the students who planned leaving the rural community were less interested in having a family. These students' goals were more centered on career, traveling and luxuries.

The great majority of the participants, though, placed raising a family as their main dream. The other two aspects almost all of the participants mentioned as important for their future were a job that would allow them to live comfortably and owning a house.

Closing Thoughts

In this study we attempted to understand the effects of "exposure to the outside world" as defined by Fitchen (1981), through interviews with 17 young people from four different rural high schools while they were seniors and again a year later. All of them did leave their home communities and most were completing their first year in college during the second interview.

In this group of adolescents, the most striking theme to emerge from the interviews was the shock of coping with a multicultural world in a more urban setting. During the 12th grade, participants that were most likely to identify their home community as sheltered and closed-minded were the ones who had lived elsewhere for some time while growing up. After graduation virtually all of the participants looked back on their rural community as unicultural and prejudiced, and several stories were related to document how the prejudice was played out. Almost all participants felt that they had achieved a more tolerant or liberal stance through their exposure to cultural differences after graduation. They often contrasted themselves to friends who had stayed home and had not changed at all.

Generally, our group of participant felt that their rural high schools had prepared them well academically for college. Students who went on to

four year colleges were the most positive about their academic preparation. There was a consistent complaint, however, that their rural high schools had not given them the social skills to cope adequately with more urban settings and larger institutions. It was felt that nothing in their high school curriculum anticipated the social issues they would face on leaving a rural setting.

Changes in educational aspirations among our participants seemed to occur between the time of the two interviews and were related to outside factors. More participants attended community colleges than planned, while fewer enrolled in four-year programs. This shift in plans was usually due to financial reasons or acceptance rates from colleges. Women in our group generally had higher aspirations than males, but males had more specific career objectives than females.

Women were also more likely to plan on leaving their rural community, both before and after graduation. Generally, participants appreciated the advantages of growing up in a rural community, more so after graduation. Most plan to settle in community similar to their own, but often in a more suburban locale. Long range goals of this group were rather straightforward and down to earth, and seemed to change little over time. Most wanted to own a home, be financially comfortable, and have a solid family life. More than half of the participants specifically mentioned the importance of providing a stable family atmosphere to their own children and avoiding the problems associated with divorce.

The "country values" of participants seemed to consolidate and grow more pronounced after exposure to the outside world. The rural community that seemed dull and boring to high school seniors often seemed peaceful, friendly, and supportive to graduates. Personal value

systems that were in conflict with the fast pace and party atmosphere of colleges were often attributed to growing up in the country. These young people expressed a basic identification with nature and the renewing qualities of close contact with the outdoors that became clearer after leaving the rural setting.

While they gained perspective on their roots from exposure to the outside world and became capable of criticizing the faults of their rural homes, it does seem that for our participants the geographical setting of their childhood shaped the very structure the psyche (Hermans, Kempen, & VanLoon, 1992). Our participants' perceptions support Fitchen's (1981) notion that "rural" is experienced as structure, social and psychological. Leaving the community does impact their development significantly. However, we would guess that the things which are fundamentally important to these rural youths are different from their counterparts from an urban setting. Moreover, we hypothesize that these basic value and perceptual differences persist over time.

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